A library for dissenters

At Oakland's Data Center, authors and activists track down hard-to-find info on everything from toxic waste to Soviet dissidents

by Fred Setterberg

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, I was writing an article that required a crash course on the persecution of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria by government bureaucrats and the armed forces. My knowledge of the issue equalled that of the average American: absolutely nothing.

Fortunately, I did know about the Data Center, the nation's leading "public interest library," located in Oakland, Calif.

"Sure, we have a file on that," responded a Data Center archivist, one of four library school graduates on staff. He handed me a fat folder full of dog-eared clippings about the persecution of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, taken from the *New York Times* and other U.S. newspapers, Amnesty International reports, and magazine highlights culled from the English-language foreign press. In two minutes, the Data Center had saved me about ten hours' work. Instead of tediously poring over the public library's all-too-detailed small-print periodical indexes and then piecing together dozens of sources at the eyesight-rending microfiche machines, I had the whole story plopped into my hands in an instant.

Low-tech but efficient

Since then, I've consistently returned to the Data Center—along with some thousand other journalists, scholars, attorneys, and political activists who each year employ its low-tech but highly efficient research system to investigate a story, strengthen support for a good cause, or blacken the eye of a bad guy by wielding the big stick of public record.

Throughout the week, you can find them gathered in the Data Center's cluttered corners, trailing past the rows of newspaper-filled crates and the overflowing stacks of books and magazines: immigration specialists documenting human rights atrocities in Guatemala and El Salvador to halt deportations; rank-and-file labor activists untangling international investments by their company that may lead to a domestic plant closure; local reporters and foreign journalists researching the institutions and individuals that foment progress—or prevent it—in the Bay Area and the world.

"When news of the Irangate scandal first broke, this file provided one of the richest background sources available anywhere for investigators wishing to trace its nefarious progress."

"Basically we're a library for people involved in social change," said Fred Goff, the Data Center's president and founder.

Influencing world events

In recent years, the Data Center has played an important background role in world events. With little fanfare, its archivists excavated information to help lobbyists battle the Bork Supreme Court nomination, assisted negotiators of the Arias peace plan in Central America with its extensive regional reports, and worked with the Philippine government to sniff out the trail of Ferdinand Marcos' pirated wealth.

Of course, compared to the scope of large academic or public libraries, the Data Center's informational purview may seem narrow—but it runs deep. The library collects tons of materials that anatomize the core of economic and political clout around the world: some 7,000 files on U.S. corporations dating back at least 10 years (a primary resource for Milton Moskowitz's best-selling almanac of corporate America, *Everybody's Business*); profiles of dozens of nations, covering subjects ranging from the devastation of Costa Rica's rain forests to Soviet bloc dissidents; a growing collection on censorship, propaganda, and the erosion of First Amendment rights; and a sterling labor section that outstrips most university libraries, seeded with the private collection of the late labor journalist Paul Jacobs.

At the heart of these collections lies the Data Center's unique clipping files. Each week the staff surveys, sorts, and clips about 2,500 articles by hand and then stuffs them into a plethora of bulging folders with such provocative headings as *Mercenaries, Evangelicals, International Debt Crisis*, and *Toxic Waste*—all the major issues and grim public preoccupations of our time. "We gather information in times of crisis and upheaval," summarized Andy Kivel, the center's director of resource ser-

Last year, **Fred Setterberg**'s reporting on U.S. military policy in Honduras for *Mother Jones* was selected as one of the best 25 stories of the year by the media watchdog group Project Censor. The article, like many he has written for *Life, The Nation, Hippocrates, The Utne Reader* and other journals, began with a trip to the Data Center.

vices. And as new crises are spawned and documented, the files continue to grow.

In some instances, the Data Center's narrow focus has even anticipated issues that would later blossom into national obsessions. In 1983, for example, the staff began clipping articles on the private financing of the Nicaraguan Contras. When news of the Irangate scandal first broke, this file provided one of the richest background sources available anywhere for investigators wanting to trace its nefarious progress. In fact, the first book on the subject, *The Iran-Contra Connection* by Jonathan Marshall, Peter Dale Scott, and Jane Hunter, was rapidly produced in the heat of the controversy with the primary assistance of Data Center files.

Focus on the fringes

The Data Center fills out its clipping files with a unique collection of more than 350 periodicals dissecting the fringes of American society. Researchers alert to rumblings on the American right can delve into a spate of insiders' accounts, from *Soldier of Fortune* to the *Moral Majority Report*. On the left, the Data Center staff shelve *Counterspy, Sojourners*, and Cuba's *Granma*.

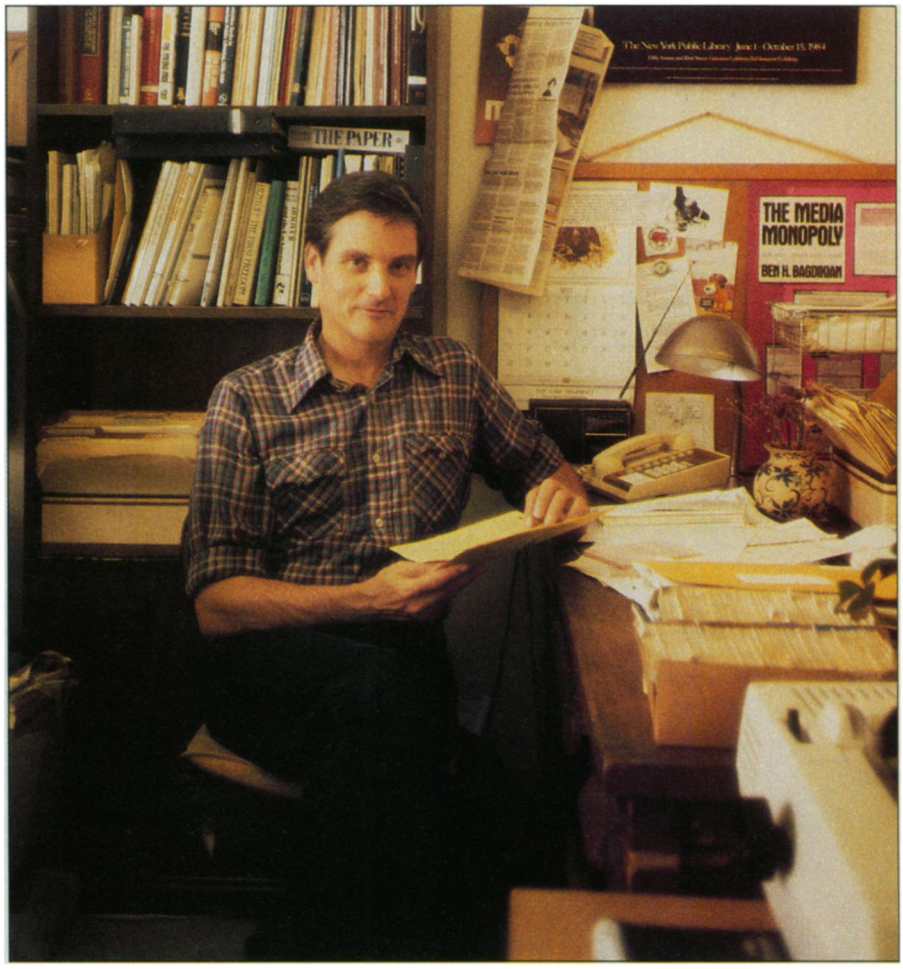
"One of the Data Center's patron saints is I.F. Stone," said Fred Goff, gesturing toward the ramparts of newsprint and wobbly stacks of files lined up along the library's poster-plastered walls. "He said that if you could put your hands on the public record, you'd find a tremendous amount—It's a goldmine for people who want to do independent analysis. The trick is to put it all together."

Strangely enough, the task of putting it all together is made easier by the library's medieval preference for clipping and sorting, in lieu of the computerized data banks propping up most private research firms. For one thing, unlike may databases, the clipping files include the full text of articles, including maps, graphs, and charts. And much of the Data Center's materials, such as their copies of the underground Sandinista newspaper prior to the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, simply can't be found within conventional computerized systems.

In the future, the Data Center will be relying more on computerized systems for the major daily press. But it really doesn't come down to a duel between technologies—the computer versus the Clipit knife. More important is the matter of judgment. The Data Center staff closely track a limited range of issues over the course of many years; in their perpetual search for "the most information value per column inch," they get to know who said what about whatever—and where the clipping is now housed. Unlike the computerized systems that usually rely on key words in headlines or titles to turn up relevant materials—and often produce staggering bills for overkill efforts—the Data Center provides the priceless and irreplaceable tool of a flexible and informed human intelligence.

The Data Center originally grew out of the documentation needs of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), a highly respected research organization producing important analysis on Latin American affairs, which Goff cofounded in 1966.

"One of NACLA's strengths was the footnote," said Goff. "It built credibility." But with time, it also proved impossible to simultaneously research complex topics and write about them with due speed. The Data Center was established in 1977 to handle the prodigious demands of documentation.



Ann Van Steenberg

Data Center's founder and president Fred Goff.

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A library for dissenters

Today the concerns of South and Central America still remain at the heart of the library's collections. The Data Center publishes *Information Services on Latin America (ISLA)*, a 350-page monthly compendium of all the region's important news and feature stories covered by the *Christian Science Monitor, Washington Post, Financial Times of London,* and six other major U.S. and European newspapers. Familiar to most Latin Americanists, *ISLA* assists scholars and journalists around the world in researching everything from election fraud to indigenous cultures. The comprehensive scope of the publication, combined with its easy access to a variety of information, has even prompted one university professor in Florida to forbid his students to use it when writing term papers. "Why?" asked an astonished Goff, when he heard the news at a library convention. "Because it makes research too easy," he was told.

Low-budget library

For all its accomplishments, the Data Center manages to scrape by on a remarkably low budget. The library supports its staff of 12 (assisted by 30 interns and volunteers who log about 2,500 hours of unpaid work throughout the year) for a mere $250,000 annually. Sixty percent of its income comes from modest fees charged to members. (An individual can use the Data Center for four dollars per day, or become a member for as little as $20 per year.) Last year the remaining operating expenses were picked up by $78,000 in foundation funding and donations from more than 500 individual supporters.

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Just last year, the Data Center's volume of business grew by 25%, fed in part by the persistent accolades of its members and a sudden prairie fire of word-of-mouth referrals. As ex-CIA agent-turned-exposé writer Philip Agee ironically observed, "Not since I left the CIA have I seen such a valuable library for activists."

Two years ago, the nation's leading "library for dissenters" was even praised by, of all places, the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense. Referring to another Data Center publication tracking U.S. plant shutdowns, the assistant to then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger wrote with a tone of begrudging admiration: "[*Plant Shutdowns Monitor*] appears to be the single available listing of current plant closures/cutbacks in the country. At this point, yours is the only game in town."

"We even have one client," laughed Goff, "who contracts with a major commercial research firm in the East. All of our work for him is conducted over the phone. One day he called and wanted to know if he could *buy* the Data Center." Goff gestures around the library, towards the troves of hand-clipped articles and the small reading room typically filled with human rights activists, immigration lawyers, and reporters.

"You see," explains Goff, pleased with the roomful of discreet page-turning and quiet notepad-scribbling, "this guy had never visited our offices." □

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